

## Column on the County Budget

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Harry Truman took pride in a plaque on his Oval Office desk that read “The buck stops here.” But that was a long time ago. Today, President Bush and, on the state level, Governor Bob Ehrlich, have turned that aphorism on its head. To them, the buck stops “there” – at local government.

Like many other local governments, Montgomery County has had to step up to the plate and fill funding shortfalls and mandates passed on to us by the feds and the state.

Why do we do it? Why don't we just throw up our hands, rubber-stamp the shortfalls, and blame the other guys?

Maybe it's because of the working poor family who needs child care help in order to get or keep a job. Or the pre-schooler or kindergartener who is four or five years old only once and can succeed if they are given the chance to be educated in a preschool program or full day kindergarten. Or the student who has spent most of his or her elementary school career in a portable. Or perhaps it's the commuter stuck in traffic who would switch to transit with just a modest incentive; or would take metro if they could park in a garage.

Montgomery County is a good place to live, work, and raise a family. But it didn't get that way by accident. Over many years we have invested our resources to ensure a world-class school system, an award-winning county parks system, and a diversified economy on the cutting-edge of innovation.

All that can be lost, however, if we don't maintain these investments.

Witness our current budget, just approved for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

First, we incorporated millions in budget cuts that were included in mid-year budget savings plans over the past two years.

Then we addressed the gaps left by Governor Ehrlich: \$15 million in Thornton Commission funding for education, tens of millions in school construction aid, \$10 million in County monies “borrowed” from the State Transportation Trust Fund, and cuts in child welfare, substance abuse, and mental health.

Put plainly, Bob Ehrlich punted – and pulled his team off the field. We didn't have that choice.

Instead we fully funded our schools budget, expanding full-day kindergarten to an additional 17 schools. We restored hours of operation and staffing to County libraries, added an additional Fire recruit class, restored after-school programs for at-risk youth, and increased frail elderly home care and senior transportation. We accelerated road planning and funded more transit incentives to encourage commuters to get out of their cars.

In our capital budget, we increased our school construction by 43 percent over the next six years and boosted spending on traffic congestion relief by nearly 15 percent.

Moreover, we included nearly \$11 million in property tax relief – giving back some of the \$30 million County taxpayers paid with Governor Ehrlich’s five-cent property tax increase of last year.

How did we do it? By increasing the County energy tax, which falls mostly on businesses and on federal facilities that otherwise go untaxed by the County. Coupled with the property tax cut, the homeowner with a \$300,000 home will pay only \$7 more annually.

No one likes raising taxes – any taxes. But when local governments are left holding the bag by the feds and the state for critical needs in education, transportation, and our social safety net, the math is easy.

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